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# Is secrecy possible if the . . .

Illustration by Terry E. Smith / The Washington Times

We'll probably never know whether Sen. Jesse Helms, the right-wing moralist from North Carolina, did or did not make public secrets of the Central Intelligence Agency when he let fly with his accusations that the CIA financed the election campaign of Jose Napoleon Duarte.

The reason we won't know is that nobody except Mr. Helms wants to taint Mr. Duarte's election. Most senators assume that the CIA did its best to help him win it, are glad he won, and don't wish to embarrass him by asking who paid the bill.

If Mr. Duarte had not won, aid to El Salvador would have been cut off, because everybody also assumes that Mr. Duarte's rival, Roberto D'Aubuisson, is tied into the right-wing death squads which have been the chief obstacle to aid.

So it really doesn't matter much whether Sen. Helms used information he acquired by virtue of his post on the Senate's Select Intelligence Committee or whether, as he says, he made his charges after reading an El Salvador newspaper. The important point is that once again it has demonstrated that the Central Intelligence Agency does not seem to be able to keep a covert operation covert.

Indeed, it appears that, under the direction of William Casey, the agency doesn't care anymore. Maybe Mr. Casey's World War II background tells him that secrecy doesn't matter. Mr. Casey had charge of running agents into Germany during the closing days of that war and though he was largely successful, his success did not depend upon great secrecy. If some of the agents completed their sabotage assignments, that was success. Getting caught meant death to the agent but no embarrassment to the country.

Forty years later, Mr. Casey seems to be proceeding on the same assumptions. In Nicaragua, we are conducting a "covert" operation consisting of an army of thousands and the Congress debates the question of whether or not to keep the army in being just as though it consisted of regular units of the United States. The word "covert" is so much baggage.

It surprises me that no one seems to care. "Plausible deniability" was a phrase which used to have a hard meaning and to which covert operators attached a great significance. But if Mr. Reagan were to deny to a foreign statesman that the United States was supporting an army in Nicaragua or had paid for the election of Mr. Duarte, he would be regarded as both a fool and a liar. Of course he will never make such a claim.

Does this tendency to shrug our shoulders and permit our secret operations to become widely known make any difference to the national security? I should think so, and in at least two ways.

First, it is destructive of morale and discipline at the Central Intelligence Agency. If it doesn't matter whether secrets become public, why bother keeping secrets?

Second, and more important, the habit of not caring whether covert operations become public removes an important restriction on the president and the director of Central Intelligence.

Until the era of Ronald Reagan and Bill Casey, there were certain things the United States couldn't do because it couldn't do them secretly.

Covert action implies a certain respect for the good opinion of mankind. We might want to undertake an action in a Western European country which would be helpful to our own security. But if we thought the general public in that country would find out about the action, we might decide that the risk of endangering our relations and our good name with the people of that country would make the game not worth the candle.

Mr. Casey and Mr. Reagan are saying by their deeds that in Central America, at least, we no longer care what the people think.

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